Chapter 4 – Self-realization

4.1 Introduction

In the two previous chapters, two broad claims have been made: 1) that a reframed interpretation of self-realization, provided it is able to remedy some of the problems attached to the late modern interpretation, remains a valuable moral ideal, also for aging individuals; and 2) that such a reframed discourse of self-realization could offer a fruitful resource for the development of a new category of cultural narratives about later life, namely, narratives of becoming, that can counter the adverse effects of existing dominant decline- and age-defying narratives.

In chapters 4-8 the outlines of such a reframed view of self-realization are sketched. The intention is, first of all, to make a plausible case for a view of self-realization that acknowledges the social embedding and constitution of human beings that is disregarded by the late modern self-realization discourse. Moreover, I explore whether the philosophical tradition of self-realization also enables coming up with an account that can relate to the reality of existential vulnerability in a more satisfactory way. It follows from the previous argument that both these issues are quintessential for the creation of an account of self-realization that can be applied to the context of aging (see §2.5). This chapter makes a start with this endeavor. In §4.2, the following questions are addressed. First, *what* can be understood by self-realization in the suggested interpretation (§4.2.1)? Second, *who* is the self that is involved in self-realization (§4.2.2)? Third, *how* does the process of self-realization take shape in practice (§4.2.3)? And fourth, *when* is self-realization manifested in people's lives (§4.2.4)? From my discussion of these questions, self-realization arises as a process of moral self-development aimed at the realization of one's potential for moral agency, which necessitates identification with a certain image of who we want to be, or rather become. This presupposes that we have an orientation toward what is valuable and worthy to us.

Conceptualizing self-realization as optimal moral self-development implies that it relies on an image of what is "best" in ourselves. How this concept of "best" can be understood is discussed in §4.3. Probing the historical and phil-

osophical background of thinking about self-realization makes us aware of the variety of ways in which the best in human beings has been conceptualized by different thinkers in the course of Western history. In §4.3.1, I discuss a selection of these views from philosophical history. In §4.3.2, I argue that from this brief catalogue of different conceptualizations of the best to be realized as part of self-realization, three main threads arise that together weave the fabric of the self-realization discourse as it is conceptualized in this study: autonomy, authenticity and virtue. These themes deserve more attention than can be given to them in the context of this chapter, and are discussed in separate chapters (6, 7 and 8 respectively).

Having thus provided a starting point for the reframing of self-realization, the final part of this chapter (§4.4) discusses two themes that merit special attention because they may raise doubt about the application of the self-realization discourse to the context of aging. §4.4.1 focuses on the possible tension between self-realization as a future-directed endeavor, founding a teleological ethics, and the fact that aging confronts one with a shrinking time horizon; the reality that one's past is longer than one's expected future, and that the end of one's life is approaching. §4.4.2 focuses on the possible tension between the endeavor to realize oneself and the reality of existential vulnerability, which is associated with the human condition in general, but is increasingly radically confronted while aging.

4.2 Introducing self-realization

Imagine a gardener. She tends the piece of the earth that happens to be her habitat year after year with effortful dedication. Her ultimate aim is a garden blossoming with flowers or offering rich harvests of fruits and vegetables. This aspiration is not realized by itself however; the gardener striving for a flourishing garden needs to work hard and put in her best efforts: pruning branches threatening to outgrow the others, digging and weeding, watering, preventing her plants from burning in the sun, et cetera. The work is never finished, because even after a good season there is always the next one, with new crops and flowers that await fruition. Nor is the success of this garden entirely in the hands of the gardener herself. Infertile soil, a particularly rainy or dry season, insects or snails that ruin vulnerable seedlings; all threaten the ultimate flourishing of the garden, and need to be dealt with by the gardener. Sometimes, some fertilizer or extra watering helps, but at other times, setbacks just have to be endured hoping for a better season next year.

This gardener, working to realize a flourishing garden, presents a metaphor to illustrate the purpose and process of self-realization. Generally speaking, self-realization pertains to the ideal that people should *make the best of them-*

selves, i.e., strive for optimal flourishing by continuously aiming to become who they are. The individual agent works on herself to realize her potential for flourishing, just like the gardener cultivates the garden. The purpose, simply put, is to live the best possible life that one's talents and circumstances allow for. Ethical perspectives based on self-realization are therefore concerned with the fundamental question in moral philosophy: how to *live well* (V. Gerhardt 1999). The focus on this basic ethical question, combined with the engagement with realizing the best in ourselves leads me to the contention that self-realization is most fruitfully understood as a process of *moral self-development,* exemplified in the expression *becoming who you are* (see §7.3.2).

Self-realization describes both an ideal state and the developmental process necessary to reach this state. Following a definition by Gewirth (1998), self-realization (or self-fulfillment, in his terminology) consists in "carrying to fruition one's deepest desires or one's worthiest capacities. It is a bringing of oneself to flourishing completion, an unfolding of what is strongest or best in oneself, so that it represents the successful culmination of one's aspirations or potentialities" (p. 3). Gewirth thus presents self-realization as a maximizing conception, aimed at superlatively formulated goals, representing the best, deepest, worthiest, et cetera, that people are able to accomplish.

Self-realization provides the basis for a so-called teleological conception of ethics, where human beings are perceived as striving towards a telos, or ultimate purpose. Self-realization discourse generally also reserves a special status for the individual moral agent, though not necessarily in the late modern atomistic, de-contextualized interpretation. The optimal fulfillment of the agent's potential is seen as conditional for a good life. The corresponding strand of thinking in moral philosophy has been interpreted as *ethical individualism* or *eudaimonism* (Norton, 1979). The emphasis on the good life as consisting in the optimal development and fulfillment of individual abilities for flourishing (*eudaimonia*) further underscores my claim that self-realization is best understood as a process of moral self-development.

Although what counts as a good life for us is deeply intertwined with the good of others, it remains important to realize that what principally underlies self-realization is the good of this unique individual. As Feinberg (1992) stresses, "My good is something peculiarly mine [...] Anything else that is good for me [...] is good because it contributes to my good, the fulfilments of my strongest stable tendencies [...] it is logically irrelevant to the question of *what my good is* whether my good is itself 'good' when judged from an external position." (p. 325). Thus, the good that is the purpose strived for in self-realization need not necessarily correspond to any universal conception of good.

At the same time, most philosophers writing about self-realization agree that actions and purposes that violate common "objective" standards of morality, such as the Golden Rule, are excluded as valid goals of self-fulfillment (Fein-

berg, 1992). Also, as C. Taylor (1989) stresses, the good cannot be an individual creation, because we define what is good for us by positioning ourselves in relation to an individual-transcending moral horizon of culturally and historically developed conceptions of good. Which of these conceptions of good we choose to identify as ours, and how we respond to concrete situations however, remains an individual endeavor. As V. Gerhardt (1999) underscores, "*Ich, dieses konkrete Ich, als das ich mich selbst erfahre, muss meine eigenen Gedanken zu meinen eigenen Problemen und Zwecken denken* [I, this concrete I, as which I experience myself, have to formulate my own thoughts about my own problems and goals]" (p. 33, translation HL)

As stated before, this study aims to draw on the rich and complex philosophical discourse on self-realization to suggest an alternative to the late modern interpretation of self-realization. This act of reframing self-realization and its constitutive concepts should be able to remedy the problems that arise when applying the self-realization discourse to the context of aging (see §2.5.1). I will introduce this study's interpretation by considering four questions: 1) *What* is strived for and (ideally) realized in self-realization? 2) *Who* is striving to realize it? 3) *How* is it realized?, and 4) *When* is self-realization manifested in people's lives? These questions respectively address the *purpose* of self-realization (§4.2.1), its underlying conception of the *self (*§4.2.2), the *practice* of self-realization (§4.2.3), and the *timing* of self-realization (§4.2.4).

4.2.1 The purpose of self-realization

What is the purpose strived for in self-realization? The most obvious and simple answer is probably: realization of the self. But what might this mean? Given the fact that I have defined self-realization as a process of moral self-development, the purpose of self-realization can be broadly defined in terms of the optimal fulfillment of one's potential for moral agency. Moral agency is understood in this study as the practical expression of one's moral identity or self, and defined as *the ability to lead a good life, with and for others, according to one's highest aspirations and best capacities, as full participating members of a society/community* (see §5.5 for further elaboration).

In the gardening metaphor, the purpose is a flourishing, blooming garden, yielding rich harvests of fruits, flowers and vegetables. But the purpose also includes the optimal development of the gardener herself as a gardener. In any case, the purpose represents an *ideal* picture, situated in the future. Its realization is hoped and strived for, and the gardener can stimulate it by putting her best efforts into it; but success can by no means be guaranteed. Analogously, in self-realization we strive to create an ideal self, the best or at least a better version of ourselves that we aspire to become in the future and bring to expression in our choices and actions. We may have dreams we identify with or aspirations

to become a certain person, for example, a good teacher, a successful manager, a trustworthy friend, or a mentor others turn to for advice. Alternatively, our circumstances may prompt us to develop certain qualities in ourselves that were previously missing or underdeveloped, for instance, when we are confronted with a sick relative who needs our caring capacities, or when a situation of injustice requires the courage to stand up for our rights or those of others. Here too, we give the development of ourselves in the desired direction our best efforts, but success is not guaranteed and can be stymied by various factors. Within my presentation of the purpose of self-realization as the actualization of our potential for moral agency, it is clarifying to specify two different modes of self-realization, described as aspiration fulfillment and capacity fulfillment (Gewirth, 1998).

- *Aspiration fulfillment* pertains to the realization of one's deepest desires. Self-realization as aspiration fulfillment does not refer to any arbitrary desire, however. Instead, it is focused on our deepest aspirations, which relate to our desire to be a certain kind of person. This implies that it goes beyond having superficial pleasurable feelings or experiences. It pertains to what people consider as the most valuable among their desires, worthy of guiding their choices and actions. For instance, if it is my deep aspiration to be a good friend, my desire to be there for a friend in need when she calls should overrule my desire to sit on the couch and watch TV, or I will stymie my striving for self-realization.

  It is crucial for aspiration fulfillment that one identifies with a certain image of who one wants to be, which then guides the choice of goals to strive for in self-realization – who one wants to become. Such identification presupposes the ability to make what C. Taylor has called "qualitative contrasts" and "strong evaluations" (C. Taylor, 1985a, 1989). With these terms, C. Taylor describes a process of ordering one's desires along the lines of their *value*, their representation of a certain higher good worthy to strive for. A similar thought is defended in V. Gerhardt's (1999) account of self-realization, which states that the ability to formulate "*Grunde* [grounds]", i.e. motives for action that are constitutive of one's identity, is crucial in self-realization. Consequently, in C. Taylor's and V. Gerhardt's accounts aspirations associated with a higher ideal of the self – for instance being a courageous or a caring person – are perceived as higher or more worthy than other aspirations or motivations that lack this identity-constituting value, such as making a lot of money or going on vacation.

  Importantly, developing the aspirations to become a certain kind of person presupposes that we have access to cultural identity resources that we can identify with, such as inspiring stories, images and exemplars (see §3.2.1). Even though our aspirations are authentically our own, we cannot form

them in isolation from our socio-cultural context. It is this context that both provides us with the standards for strong evaluation (C. Taylor, 1989) and gives (or denies!) us access to certain options to identify with (Lindemann Nelson, 2001; M. Walker, 2007). Since both our self and our socio-cultural context are in a constant process of transformation, our identity-constituting aspirations are neither static nor monistic. Different aspirations may conflict with each other, and priorities among aspirations constantly have to be reconsidered. From the viewpoint of aging, it is also important to note that aspirations may change or alternate during our lives, either because our priorities change or because our socio-cultural context precludes certain aspirations for certain age groups (see §4.4.1).

- *Capacity fulfillment* pertains to realizing the best or highest of one's capacities, 'the best that it is in you to become' (Gewirth, 1998, p. 59). Capacities are inherent latent potentialities that a person possesses, but that require actualization in practical contexts. Importantly, the capacities relevant here are those that are activated by the choice of the self, which excludes powers that escape our conscious control, such as breathing. These capacities enable us to bring about change, both in ourselves and in the world outside ourselves. Examples of such capacities include the ability for reason, the ability to learn things, the ability for compassion, aesthetic sensitivity, intuition, and the ability to care for others.

  Like aspirations, capacities too relate to the ideal selves we strive to become. However, whereas aspiration fulfillment may vary from person to person and among different cultural contexts, Gewirth (1998) claims that capacity fulfillment pertains to more "objective goods or values" (p. 15). He defends a *universalist* conception of morality, which assumes that the ultimate criterion for evaluating the moral value of goals and purposes lies in their contribution to people's generic freedom and well-being. In his view, these values are of fundamental importance to all human beings, regardless of their social and cultural background, gender, ethnicity, age, and so on. Thus, he states that "[...] with regard to capacity-fulfillment as achieving the best that it is in one to become, what is best here is whatever is found by reason to lead to or consist in the fullest development of freedom and well-being, within the limits set by the universalist morality of human rights" (Gewirth, 1998, p. 112). According to Gewirth, human reason is the quintessential capacity that helps people to distinguish aspirations, choices and actions along the lines of their contribution to freedom and well-being. Consequently, he perceives reason as the "best" capacity involved in self-realization as capacity fulfillment. He claims that capacity fulfillment ultimately forms a higher mode of self-realization than aspiration fulfillment, because successful aspiration fulfillment depends on the capacity for reason, in order to evaluate

one's aspirations along the moral standard of their contribution to freedom and well-being.

This study conceives of self-realization in such a way that aspiration fulfillment and capacity fulfillment both present valid modes to interpret the purpose of self-realization. I tend to agree with Gewirth in his contention that capacity-fulfillment is more fundamental because the formulation of aspirations depends on the possession of certain capacities. However, I do not follow him in his preference for a universalist interpretation of self-realization ethics that elevates reason as the most important capacity for self-realization.

Apart from universalist views of morality, Gewirth (1998) distinguishes *particularist* views of morality, focusing on interpersonal relations of love, friendship, loyalty and connection, and *personalist* views of morality, focusing on the capacities for flourishing as an individual (p. 52-55). In my view, all three of these views of morality can principally defend equally viable accounts of best capacities and aspirations of relevance to self-realization. Gewirth is right, however, when he warns that goals and aspirations furthered by particularist and personalist approaches can sometimes be at odds with basic universal moral principles, for example, if particularist considerations lead to xenophobic practices. In those cases, I agree that universal principles should function as a "sieve" to exclude immoral actions and purposes from the realm of self-realization (this roughly corresponds to the view of ethics and morality formulated by Ricoeur (1992; see §5.4)).

What precisely is the content of the best or highest capacities or aspirations that constitute the purpose of self-realization has been conceptualized in many different ways in the history of Western philosophy. I will further elaborate on this in §4.3.1. This study takes the position that the purpose of self-realization should be seen in terms of a complex fabric of three interweaving threads, namely, autonomy, authenticity, and virtue (see further §4.3.2). Each thread represents a distinct tradition of moral-philosophical thinking with its own claim to ultimate validity. A viable interpretation of self-realization in the context of this study, I contend, should not force us to choose between these three threads or place them in a hierarchical order of importance, especially given the context of late modern moral pluralism in which it should be applied. Instead, I claim that a satisfactory interpretation of self-realization should be able to acknowledge the value and legitimacy of the purposes suggested by all three threads. A choice between their claims, if necessary, should depend on the characteristics of the specific situation asking for our moral response. The question what to do when one's demented mother, unhappily housed in a nursing home, keeps asking "when will you take me home?" probably calls for the intuitions of particularist morality and the virtue-ethical discourse, and universalist principles associated with considerations of autonomy-enhancement for

instance are of little use here. But the opposite can be the case when it comes to the question how many refugees a city should provide with housing and care in a situation of crisis, despite resistance from its inhabitants.

We could argue, in fact, that certain connections can be drawn between the three forms of morality distinguished by Gewirth and the three threads that weave the self-realization discourse according to this study. A universalist view seems most closely associated with the discourse on autonomy (see chapter 6), which traditionally strongly relies on the rational capacities Gewirth also emphasizes in his view of capacity fulfillment. On the other hand, the personalist view can be connected to the authenticity discourse, which brings aspirations and capacities associated with personal development into high relief (see chapter 7). Lastly, the particularist view of morality can be argued to emphasize considerations that show affinity with what underlies the virtue-ethical discourse, particularly given the latter's emphasis on how virtue sees the good of the self as intrinsically interwoven with the good of the community. Ideally, both "goods" should be balanced in striving for self-realization (see chapter 8).

It is also interesting to note that the three forms of morality as discussed by Gewirth – universalist, personalist, particularist – with their corresponding understandings of the highest or best capacities of human beings, can be connected with the three forms of recognition defined by Honneth (1995; see §3.2.3). Thus, love and connectedness in primary relationships (the first form of recognition) corresponds to the good underlying particularist morality. Respect for one's rights and equal treatment as citizens (the second form) corresponds to the good underlying universalist morality. Finally, the opportunities to realize one's individual goals and potentials (the third form) correspond to the good underlying personalist morality. Since I have concluded that all three forms of recognition are indispensable for exercising moral agency (see §3.2.3), the different perceptions of the best capacities connected with the three forms of morality should be treated as equally valid according to the argument of this study. They depend on each other and should be strived for in combination.

In conclusion to this section, it is important to mention that the description of the purpose of self-realization in terms of realizing the best in ourselves may easily raise the impression that it is a highly demanding goal. In a sense, this is true. After all, realizing a "good life" is a serious moral goal that requires ongoing efforts and enduring engagement and perseverance. On the other hand, it would be a misconception to assume that special qualities are needed to strive for self-realization, or that only a well-situated, highly-educated and reflexive minority qualifies to partake in the striving for self-realization. On the contrary, both Gewirth (1998) and V. Gerhardt (1999) stress emphatically that the desire to lead a good life and to transcend the given facts of our natural existence by striving for self-realization is an inclination deeply entrenched in the human condition. This assumes that self-realization is a process that everyone

in possession of the minimal capacities associated with humanness can be engaged with. Thus, though a small minority – for instance, people lacking basic consciousness of themselves, such as when they are in a coma or the end-stage of dementia – may be excluded from self-realization on this account, it remains a moral striving that is principally within the reach of the majority of people (see also §9.4.1).

4.2.2 The self in self-realization

Any interpretation of self-realization explicitly or implicitly draws on a certain understanding of the self. In chapter 2, it was discussed how the late modern discourse of self-realization relies on a problematically atomistic anthropology, presenting the individual agent as an autonomous, independent and sovereign director of their own life. By contrast, I argued, this study's reframed interpretation requires a conception of the self that acknowledges its situated, socially constituted and interdependent nature (see §2.5.2). In chapter 5, I argue in favor of a *narrative conceptualization* of the self, which seems most congenial to the purposes of this study. As a forerunner to this argument, this section will sketch some primary and more general considerations regarding how the self is understood in this study.

The self that underlies self-realization is described by Gewirth (1998) as "a continuing or enduring embodied entity that is aware of itself as a distinct person, that can anticipate a future for itself, and that has desires on which it can reflect" (p. 13). Gewirth also states that the self represents "a locus of powers or capacities that are primed for growth or development toward an inherent end, which is the good of the self" (p. 8). The idea that the self is an embodied "locus" of capacities and/or experiences, to be found in the inner realm of a person, is strongly prevalent in the history of Western modern philosophy, as illustrated by C. Taylor (1989). For example, Descartes' conception of the "cogito" emphasizes our capacity for *rationality* as crucial to who we are; Locke associates the self with our episodic *memory*; and Hume perceives it as a bundle of *experiences*. Importantly however, G. Gerhardt (1989) warns against the essentialist conceptualization of the self often associated with such ideas about localization. He emphasizes that the self is not to be seen as a clearly demarcated entity within ourselves, but should be perceived in terms of a *relation* to oneself and one's life. This relational conceptualization presents the self as being in constant dynamic transformation and without a specific locus. Thus, even though the self is associated with an inner realm, this does not imply that it needs to be purely self-directed or enclosed in itself. Returning to the gardening metaphor, we can see how self-realization presupposes a self with multiple levels: there is a currently existing self, with certain qualities and limitations (symbolized by the garden that demands cultivation); there is the self we aspire

to become (symbolized by our plans and dreams for how our garden will bloom and flourish in the future); and there is the self that has the principal capacities to act upon itself in order to develop and grow in the desired direction (symbolized by the gardener). The self-realizing moral agent, we could say, is both the garden and the gardener engaged in a process of self-development which will hopefully lead to self-improvement or realizing the best within herself (see §4.2.1).

These initial reflections already introduce some important themes relevant for an understanding of the self in this study, such as continuity or reflexivity. Some other themes however, need to be elaborated to further enrich our understanding. Below, I will briefly discuss six themes that are essential to an understanding of the self that matches the interpretation of self-realization advanced here. The themes highlighted are: reflexivity, temporality, continuity, embodiment, social and relational constitution, and ethical/moral aim.

- *Reflexivity:* In most traditional views, to be a self, in the sense of qualifying as a human agent and having a sense of personal identity, requires that one is able to reflect on one's own choices, purposes, feelings and actions. Reflexivity presupposes the ability to distance oneself from one's immediate inclinations and feelings, to take what is called a "third-person perspective" and look at oneself through the eyes of another. Frankfurt (1971) argued that it is crucial for human personhood that one can make *second-order volitions*; i.e., one should be able to evaluate one's own desires and decide towards which of them one wants to direct their behavior. The ability to reflect on oneself is often associated with the rational capacities of human beings, since it is by virtue of our reason that we are able to deliberate and make hierarchical orderings between our (first- and second-order) desires. But it can also be related to our hermeneutic and narrative capacities that enable us to interpret ourselves and bring meaningful order and coherence to the variety of experiences that make up our lives (Taylor, 1985b; see further chapter 5). In the latter case, reflexivity becomes a theme that not only concerns the third-person perspective, but also the second-person perspective, since narrative identity is principally socially constituted (see §5.3.2 and §5.3.3).
- *Temporality*: One is a self at a certain moment in time, but one is also always in the process of becoming another (version of this) self, that one aspires or has the capacity to be. Moreover, we relate to (several versions of) our past selves in formulating our current aspirations and evaluating our self-development. This presupposes that we are beings with a past, present and future that stand in a certain relation to each other. The role of temporality in the self is also mirrored in the fundamental concerns that Schechtman (1996) relates to our personal identity. The four concerns she distinguishes

are 1) a concern for *survival*, i.e., whether or not one will continue to exist in the future; 2) *self-interested concern*, i.e., the type of interest in one's own future that is assumed to be rational for a person to have; 3) a concern for *compensation*, i.e., an interest in being personally compensated or rewarded for hardship or sacrifice; and 4) *moral responsibility*, i.e., being accountable for one's choices and actions. All these concerns assume that we can anticipate future versions of ourselves, and that we have an understanding of what characterized our self in the past and what characterizes it in the present.

- *Continuity*: The temporality of the self also presupposes a certain amount of continuity or constancy over time. In order to be able to envision a future self, the self we strive to become, we cannot experience our past, present and future selves as unconnected to each other. Correspondingly, Gewirth (1998) emphasizes that "The self is not to be atomized into a series of discrete entities. Rather, self-knowledge involves a continuous process wherein the later stage learns from what has been experienced at an earlier stage and modifies its aspirations and expectations accordingly" (p. 45). Thus, the notion of moral self-development inherent in this study's understanding of self-realization assumes an element of continuity, even though it acknowledges that our self is in a constant dynamic process of transition.
  The fact that the purpose of self-realization presupposes that one identifies with an image of who one wants to become (see §4.2.1) also underscores the importance of assuming a certain amount of continuity in the self. In accordance with this, several thinkers have argued that our lives need to show some narrative integrity or constancy that underlies our self-understanding (C. Taylor, 1989; MacIntyre, 1984; Ricoeur, 1992; see also §5.2.3). V. Gerhardt (1999) states that: *"[...] dort, wo uns eine Entscheidung 'wichtig' ist, [steht] der ganze Erwartungskontext des eigenen Daseins mindestens im Hintergrund* [in cases where we truly 'care' about a choice, the whole context of expectation derived from our own being stands in the background]" (p. 407; translation HL). Thus, identity-constituting choices and actions require a horizon that encompasses our life as a sufficiently integrated whole in order to be intelligible, both to ourselves and to others. What is sufficient in this regard depends on the situation and the personal outlook of the person concerned, as one person may be able to cope with more fragmentation and uncertainty than another. However, the view defended in this study assumes that a minimal amount of experienced integration, as a necessary (though not sufficient) condition of intelligibility and meaning, is presupposed for everyone.
- *Embodiment*: A satisfactory account of the self, in the context of the interpretation of self-realization suggested in this study, should also acknowledge the importance of our embodied being for our experience of self (Atkins, 2008). As phenomenological philosophers, notably Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) have emphasized, we are pre-reflexively engaged with the world

through our bodies. Before we are able to consciously reflect on ourselves, what we are and who we strive to be and become, before we are able to express who we are through language, we already have a relationship with the world around us through our bodily existence. Our bodies enable us to feel basic sensations like thirst, hunger, or cold, to grasp things, to touch, to move, to attract attention from our caregivers, et cetera. Our bodies are also the medium that enables us to relate to other people, who respond to us through bodily gestures as well. Our embodied being is therefore perceived as a constitutive condition of our personal identity, which precedes the reflexive capacity discussed earlier.

Our embodied selfhood thereby also enables us to give form and meaning to our lived experiences, and thus apply order and coherence to our world. However, the world should not be perceived as passively undergoing the ordering activity, because according to Atkins (2008), "embodiment also has an 'interrogative mode': the body explores and discovers a world that responds to its sensing and synthesis" (p. 42). In short, our ability to act and to interact, our agency, we might say, is rooted in our embodied existence. But our bodies are also inherently vulnerable, to illness, to assault from others, to accidents and natural disasters, and ultimately to death. Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) has expressed our bodily relation to the world in terms of *intentionality*, which expresses a relation between the self and the (social and material) world characterized by mutual sensitivity and attunement. Only when this self-evident relationship with the material and social world is disrupted, as Merleau-Ponty illustrates using a case of brain damage, do we realize how deeply our personal identity and our navigation of the world depend on our embodied being and its intentional relations.

- *Social/relational constitution*: In contrast to late modern self-realization discourse (see §2.2), this study stresses a view of the self that is embedded in social relations, and constituted by socio-cultural influences. Our opportunities for exercising and developing moral agency, i.e., for self-realization, fundamentally depend on the way we are positioned in this context (see §3.2.3). The social and relational element of our self has been interpreted along various lines, which all emphasize different, but equally relevant aspects of our social and relational constitution. I will briefly discuss some examples:
  - Psychoanalytical authors like Erikson (1963) and Winnicott (1965) emphasized how a stable and healthy sense of self fundamentally depends on the availability of loving relations of basic trust with our primary caregivers in early childhood.
  - Mead's (1934/2015) symbolic interactionist approach to human personhood stressed the importance of the embedding of the person in a context of social relationships. This can be illustrated by his distinction

between the *I* and the *Me*. Whereas the *Me* represents the self that is the product of social interactions, the *I* represents the agential, creative response to this symbolic social constitution of the self. According to Mead's theory, the self emerges from social interactions, rather than being the precondition of these interactions. However, through the dialectic between *I* and *Me,* identity is not totally socially determined, but has an important agential quality as well.

- Goffman's (1959) work on social roles argued that we *perform* our identities through the way we present ourselves to others and through the different social roles we play. This view implies that the self is not only socially constituted, but also a plural. It is thus more aptly described as a variety of context-dependent *selves*. After all, the way we present ourselves to our colleagues, or to strangers, may result in a very different social self than the way we present ourselves to our family and friends.
- Several philosophical authors have stressed the importance of the social and relational basis of our self for our moral relations with others, which Parekh (2008) interprets in terms of our *human identity*. This term relates to an awareness of particular unique qualities we possess as members of the human species, and the moral demands these qualities pose on our conduct and choices. The moral sensitivity to the demands of others as well as oneself, by virtue of one's shared membership of humanity, can be seen as crucial to the status of the person as a moral subject or a moral agent; i.e., someone who can be held accountable by others and accept responsibility for their choices and actions. Accountability, responsibility, or as Ricoeur (1992) terms it, imputability, all presuppose the existence of fundamental and constitutive moral relationships between the subject claiming a certain identity and the surrounding social world (see also §5.4).

- *Ethical/moral aim:* The final relevant aspect of this study's view of the self is its intrinsic ethical or moral dimension. This expresses the connection between our identity – who we are and who we want to become – and a dimension of ethical and/or moral values that we identify with. Our identification with such ethical or moral aims is constitutive of our moral agency, which is understood in this study as the expression of our moral identity in concrete choices and actions. An account of the self that matches this study's reframed interpretation of self-realization presupposes that we are beings inevitably engaged with what Ricoeur (1992) has called the fundamental "ethical aim" of human life: "a good life, with and for others, in just institutions" (p. 172).

My account of the self as intrinsically moral follows C. Taylor (1989), who claims that we can only understand our existence as human beings situated

in a moral space. C. Taylor assumes that our personal identity, i.e., our answer to the question of who we are, is inextricably linked to our conceptions of the good. Human beings can only acquire self-understanding by positioning themselves in relation to what is of deepest value to them. In C. Taylor's (1989) own words, "To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand" (p. 27). C. Taylor's account of moral identity lays strong emphasis on the capability of the individual agents themselves to form moral orientations, and to appropriate through their choices and actions certain values that are constitutive of who they want to be. However, the normative, moral or ethical dimension of identity also pertains to our attitude towards - and relationship with others. The identity-constituting choices we make are embedded in and influenced by our social relations. They also have an inevitable impact on others. Our evaluation and moral legitimation of our choices and actions should consider this impact. Moreover, the social nature of identity suggests that there is always an element of the other included in the self, the influence of which is constantly negotiated in a dynamic dialogical relationship (Ricoeur, 1992; Lindemann, 2014; see also §5.3.2, §5.4).

4.2.3 The practice of self-realization

How do human beings engage in self-realization? In other words, what does the practice of self-realization look like? Recalling the gardening metaphor, it is important to note that the purpose of reaching a flourishing garden is strived for by engaging in a variety of activities. On the one hand, bringing about the flourishing of the garden is a *purposive* striving, planned and chosen by the gardener because it is a goal she values. On the other hand, it is mainly through a variety of other activities, like sowing, planting, digging, watering, et cetera, that the gardener realizes this striving. Consequently, it is often complicated to point at one well-defined activity that constitutes the flourishing that is strived for. Moreover, the gardener's work is never finished, because she works with living nature, which is in continuous transition. This teaches us some important things regarding the practice of self-realization. First, self-realization can appear in human lives both as a *purposive striving* and as an *epiphenomenon*, a by-effect of other activities. In the first case, it is a practice undertaken intentionally and for its own sake, because one values the goal of self-development or making the best of oneself. In the second case, self-realization is the result of other activities. These do not have self-realization as their direct and intentional goal, but may nevertheless result in the actualization of one's potential for opti-

mal flourishing. Second, the practice of self-realization cannot be reduced to an activity that is clearly delineated or marked in time. Instead, it has the features of a continuous process and is consequently never completed.

- *Self-realization as purposive striving and/or epiphenomenon*: Practicing self-realization can be an intentional purposive striving when one explicitly identifies aspects of self-fulfillment as crucial to develop in order to approach one's optimal self. For example, I may become aware of the fact that I constantly make the same mistakes, which obstructs my striving to be a good mother, spouse, sister, colleague, et cetera. From this, I may draw the conclusion that I lack self-knowledge and need to work on myself to attain better self-insight. When, as a result of this conclusion, I engage in activities explicitly intended to enhance my own self-knowledge, such as visiting a therapist or engaging in meditation on my own strengths and weaknesses, it can be said that I purposively strive to improve myself. Since this has the explicit aim of being able to lead a better life with and for others (i.e., enhancing my own moral agency), I am then, consciously and purposively, realizing myself.

  V. Gerhardt (1999) claims that the ability for purposive chosen action (as opposed to unconscious, automatically occurring behavior such as breathing or falling asleep) is indispensable to define ourselves and communicate who we are as moral agents. Consequently, it seems that the practice of self-realization is necessarily mediated through purposive action. However, the purposive aim manifested in this action need not be self-realization as such, as is the case in the example given above. Our activities can also have another purposive aim and still contribute indirectly to who we want to become. In those cases, which I suspect are more widespread than the cases of intentional self-realization, the practice of self-realization appears as an *epiphenomenon*. This means that it proceeds through other activities such as working, caring, creating things, having relationships, fulfilling social roles, et cetera. These activities are not intentionally aimed at self-realization most of the time, but self-improvement or self-development may certainly be their outcome.

  Reflecting on the practice of self-realization, it is crucial to note that in many cases our actions are only implicitly informed by who we strive to be. Further, this underlying motivation is not a matter of conscious reflexive choice. Yet, insofar as our activities contribute to the realization of the deepest aspirations or highest capacities that represent who we want to become, they contribute to the practice of self-realization. For example, by honoring my promise to accompany my friend to a doctor's appointment, I translate into action my aspiration to be a reliable friend, but this need not be a motivation I am reflectively aware of. It is important to note that it is not immaterial

which actions figure in the practice of self-realization. In order to contribute to our self-realization, our actions cannot be destructive, damaging to ourself or to others, or otherwise morally illegitimate (Gewirth, 1998). After all, it is the purpose of self-realization to optimize our moral agency, which is defined in this study as the ability to lead a good life, with and for others, according to our deepest aspirations and highest capacities, as full participating members of society (see §5.5). Any action that impedes this striving, for instance, by excluding other people from participation in society, by acting unjustly, or by failing to live up to one's potential as a result of laziness, indifference or selfishness, will also disable self-realization. The exclusion of morally damaging or illegitimate actions assumes that social processes of moral evaluation and self-legitimation are an intrinsic part of the practice of self-realization. V. Gerhardt (1999) stresses that it is implicit in our self-perception as moral agents that we grant other people the fundamental right to question our choices and judge our behavior. The social interaction involved in this dialogical process potentially plays a fundamental role in our further moral self-development (see also §4.2.2). It enhances our self-knowledge and may cause us to revise our value orientations and the purposes we strive for. Again, it is only through the expression of our identity-constituting value orientation in actions that we are able to engage in these social processes of moral evaluation.

- *Self-realization as a lifelong process*: It can also be learned from the gardening metaphor that practicing self-realization is an ongoing process that is never complete or finished. This results in part from the fact that one's image of who one wants to be or become, expressed in the deepest aspirations and best capacities one strives for, is never static but will change over one's life. This constant transformation also changes the purpose one strives for in self-realization, although a certain coherence needs to be retained. In the optimal scenario, such changes prompt a person to appropriate new grounds and develop new aspirations or capacities that will then lead to flourishing in domains that were previously beyond one's reach. Ideally, this process of self-development is characterized by inner growth, an increase in self-insight and wisdom. The hoped for result is an enhancement of one's ability for moral agency, which exemplifies a successful process of self-realization.

  However, there are also many cases in which the situation is less ideal. As a moral developmental goal strived for throughout life, self-realization is a process that will inevitably face ups and downs. The practice of self-realization can be characterized by severe struggles with oneself and/or one's surroundings. A beneficial outcome of growth and flourishing is certainly not guaranteed.

The practice of self-realization is vulnerable to all sorts of threats, both external and internal to the self. For instance, if people are institutionalized in a long-term care facility, they may have to give up previously acquired discretionary space to decide for themselves what would contribute to the life they want to live and who they want to be. This loss can result in feelings of regret, sadness, anger or hopelessness, which, if they stagnate, impede the continuation of their process of self-realization. Alternatively, older workers may feel that their experience is no longer valued by their employer or colleagues. This can result in a loss of self-confidence, in frustration and withdrawal, so that they cannot make the contribution at work that would be in accordance with the kind of employee they want to be. It is important to emphasize that such situations need not automatically be the end of self-realization. In fact, our experienced defeats and losses in life can even be made a part of our self-realization if we succeed in finding a viable attitude towards them. But this does require an adjustment of one's self-understanding, an adaptation of one's strategies for realizing certain valued aspirations and capacities and maybe also of one's purposes.

This adaptation to a new situation doesn't always come easy. In each practical situation requiring a moral response, the constellation of aspirations and capacities contributing to the optimal exercise of moral agency has to be renegotiated. Moral self-development is a chance, but cannot be a certainty. Although some periods of our lives may be characterized by relative stability, there will always be the possibility of either external or internal disturbance of this equilibrium. When this happens, it necessitates a reconsideration of the resources that we use to safeguard the coherence and meaning we experience in our lives. In periods of equilibrium, our striving to become a certain kind of person is very often more like a silent background framework than a consciously experienced goal. This does not mean that our image of the best in us doesn't influence our behavior. But we are not necessarily consciously occupied with reflection on who we want to be all the time. It is typically in situations where we become a problem to ourselves, those moments of moral or existential crisis when our self-evident patterns of behavior and value orientations are challenged or found inadequate, that the striving for self-realization is suddenly felt as a moral task that we cannot evade; otherwise we will feel imbalanced, disturbed and out of sync with ourselves, our lives and the world (V. Gerhardt, 1999).

4.2.4 The timing of self-realization

The continuous and never-ending character of the self-realization process implies that there are no specific moments or phases in life that are reserved for self-realization. At the same time, the striving for self-realization may take a

different shape in different phases of life. The account of self-realization I suggest in this study is that of a lifelong process of moral development. Its life-encompassing nature makes an ethics of self-realization particularly attractive when it comes to emphasizing that later life also harbors potentials for growth and flourishing. The gardening metaphor will again illustrate some relevant points. Gardening is an activity that never ends, but importantly, it does require different activities depending on the season. Some of these activities are flexible or repetitive, such as watering and weeding; others require a particular timing, such as planting certain crops. In spring, dead leaves and branches have to be removed, and new crops have to be sown. In summer, constant watering and weeding are needed, but summer is also the time to enjoy the blooming plants. In autumn, the time comes to harvest and to prepare for winter, when the soil rests and is restored for a new season, whereas the gardener quietly enjoys the fruits she has harvested and makes plans for crops and flowers to plant next year when the cycle of seasons starts anew.

From the perspective of timing, three observations stand out. First, there is a *cyclical* dynamics to gardening, which follows the rhythm of the seasons, in which active modes of being alternate with more retired and passive modes. Second, some activities of gardening require a specific moment in time. The ancient Greeks used the term *kairos*, meaning *the right time* for something. For instance, a crop planted too early may be destroyed by frost, but if planted too late, may not bear the desired fruits. Third, some aspects of gardening also show a *linear* dynamics of continuing growth and maturation. For instance, a rose bush will not carry many flowers the first year it has been planted, but its stems will grow over the years and develop into a strong and abundantly-blossoming plant, provided the bush is well taken care of and the circumstances are favorable. The gardener herself will also gain in experience and knowledge about gardening, which will expectedly contribute to the flourishing of her garden as well. Drawing on the analogy, I derive three relevant points about the timing of self-realization from these reflections:

- First, analogous to the *cyclical* character of gardening, self-realization is continuously of relevance throughout life, yet it may appear in different forms in different phases of our lives. We have already encountered the observation that aspirations and capacities may change over the life course (§4.2.1), which may cause a change in how we strive to realize ourselves through our choices and actions (§4.2.3). Also, as was suggested earlier, certain life events or moments of moral/existential crisis may trigger a more active occupation with the question of who we want to be or become. At other moments, our striving for self-realization remains largely inexplicit. The ups and downs of life, with periods of active self-transformation alternating with periods of equilibrium and relative stability, suggest that the urgency

felt to explicitly engage in self-realization will also vary throughout life, in the same way as the active preoccupation of the gardener with her garden.

- Second, the *kairos* aspect expresses that in some cases, self-realization requires choices to be made and actions to be undertaken at a specific moment in time, without postponement. It is detrimental to our growth and flourishing if we force ourselves to make certain decisive choices too early, for instance when a musically talented child feels forced into a career as a violinist at an age where other future options can be kept open. On the other hand, we cannot keep postponing the responsibility for our lives by refusing to make constitutive choices. This often occurs out of fear that other roads will be closed once we make a choice. Yet such postponement will probably impede our self-realization. In *Either/Or* Kierkegaard (1843/1959) makes the older judge Wilhelm warn his young protégé about the dangers of an aesthetic lifestyle that evades making ethical choices. The latter would require a steadfast engagement with a certain moral ideal of the self. As previously discussed, self-realization requires such identification with a certain image of who we want to become (§4.2.1). But our true engagement with an ideal of the self, demands that we remain true to what we care about even in difficult circumstances, by letting our value orientation guide our decisions at crucial moments. Otherwise we compromise our self, even more than our moral principles (Frankfurt, 1988a) and this can be expected to stymie our self-realization.
- Third, analogous to the *linear* character of gardening, self-realization indeed acquires heightened importance as we grow up and grow older. Most philosophical accounts of self-realization underscore that a certain amount of maturation is a condition for successful self-fulfillment. Aristotle's virtue ethics may serve as an example (*Ethica Nicomachea*; see §8.3.1)[1]. Young children first need to develop the relevant capacities to form aspirations about being a certain person before they can identify with them and translate them into action. Adolescents struggle to find models that they want to identify with, as Erikson (1963) suggested in his psycho-social model of development. Further, maturing into adulthood and old age ideally brings opportunities to deepen our self-insight and reflect upon what is truly important to us in our lives. This thought has led some thinkers, for example, Jung (1931/1995) to suggest that it is in later life that self-realization is most urgently of relevance. Jung stated that in midlife, we face a turning point in our development. Whereas the first half of life is dedicated to procreation and productivity, activities oriented towards the outside world, the

1 | In citing Aristotle, this study will follow the common convention in philosophy to use Bekker numbers for literal citations. Translated quotes from *Ethica Nicomachea* are drawn from the edition by David Ross (1980) that is on the reference list.

second half of life, according to Jung, should mark a shift inwards and an orientation towards personal growth, maturation and ripening/deepening of insight and wisdom. Of course, Jung relied on the traditions of ancient wisdom that also tend to couple self-realization to life experience and maturation, and thus, logically, to more advanced ages.

Although I disagree with the idea that self-realization is the exclusive province of later life or old age, let alone reserved for the Third Age, as contemporary cultural discourse sometimes suggests (see §2.4.3), I believe there is something to be said for the idea that self-realization can gain a deeper urgency with aging. First of all, aging comes with life experience, and although experience certainly doesn't automatically culminate in more (self-) insight and wisdom, it does increase the likelihood of developing these desirable qualities that are conducive to self-realization. Second, as has already been stressed several times, the chances of being confronted with existential vulnerability increase with aging. These confrontations are likely to expose older people more often and with higher intensity to those very situations that call for explicit reflection on one's life, on who one has been, is, and wants to be or become, that underlie the practice of self-realization (see also §4.4.2).

4.3 Exploring the best in us

In §4.2, I have presented self-realization, broadly perceived, as a process of moral self-development aimed at the realization of the *best within us*. This expression is further explored in this section. To start with, I should emphasize that the best at stake in self-realization does not represent a static end to be achieved, or an unchanging character trait. Instead, it represents a dynamically developing process. As Gewirth (1998) puts it, "The best that is 'in you' is not in you as something that is preexisting or ready-made; [...] Rather, it gets developed out of preexisting materials that can be turned in different directions through autonomous choice and habituation" (p. 60). Although the autonomous choice of the individual agent thus plays an important role, it should be mentioned that whatever is perceived as the best is also deeply influenced by socio-cultural factors, and always dependent on the particular situation and positioning of the individual. Note also that what constitutes the best is not meant to be a high bar, or static, universal standard against which people's lives are measured. What counts is that they strive for the best that is possible for them, given their individual qualities and specific situational circumstances. Of course, this should not be used as an excuse not to address and improve external conditions that form an obstacle to self-realization, as in the case of

marginalizing and stereotyping cultural master narratives that impede people's moral agency (see chapter 3).

A cursory glance at the history of Western philosophy teaches us that the best in human beings has been interpreted in very diverse and often contradictory terms. All approaches share the idea that by developing the qualities advanced, one moves closer towards the realization of the overarching moral goal of a good life, however differently this is perceived. Below, I will briefly discuss a catalogue of historical and philosophical interpretations of what may constitute the best in human beings. Because the scope of this study did not allow for an extensive historical exploration of the genealogy of ideals of self-realization, I will draw upon work done in this regard by others, notably C. Taylor (1989) and G. Gerhardt (1989).

4.3.1 Selected historical and philosophical interpretations of the best in us

The evolution of thought on self-realization can be illustrated by considering seminal views and ideas that arose in the course of philosophical history about what it means to lead a good life as a human being. G. Gerhardt (1989) has provided a categorization of four historical lines, each exemplifying a specific interpretation of the best in human beings to be actualized through self-realization:

- The *eudaimonistic* line: This line conceptualizes the best in terms of the classical Aristotelian conception of happiness or *eudaimonia*. Self-realization involves the actualization of potentialities inherent in human nature, the capacity for reason being the highest among these.
- The *naturalistic* line: This line perceives human beings as most strongly motivated by their natural needs, which presents self-preservation as the best to be strived for. Reason, highly valued in the eudaimonistic line, is seen as functional but relatively powerless compared to the natural instinct for self-preservation. The naturalistic line also acknowledges that an individual's natural needs can be in conflict with the needs of others or with an indifferent or hostile environment.
- The *aesthetic-pedagogical* line: This line perceives the best in terms of the authentic expression of the unique individuality of the human being. Importantly, this line criticizes a one-sided focus on reason as the best human potential, and underscores the equally important role of affective and creative capacities.
- The *historical-philosophical* line: This line shares the pedagogical optimism of the aesthetic-pedagogical line, but focuses on humanity as a whole instead of on the unique individual. This line, exemplified by the works of

> Hegel and Marx among others, assumes an inescapable historical dynamics directed towards the moral perfection of the community of mankind.

Though G. Gerhardt's categorization offers a useful instrument to group different historical views about what constitutes the best in human beings in self-realization, his account also has its limitations. It remains a bit imbalanced because he uses his historical sketch of different views, mainly instrumentally, to confirm his own categorization of different forms of ethics. His account lacks the richness and nuance provided by C. Taylor in his magnum opus *Sources of the self. The making of modern identity* (1989). On the other hand, G. Gerhardt (1989) does address certain relevant perspectives that are not discussed by C. Taylor, such as the Aristotelian, eudaimonistic view, which adds to the value of his work relevant to this study.

C. Taylor (1989) analyzes historical ideas of what constitutes the best in human beings in terms of moral resources for our identity. Together, these images of the best, or "hypergoods", constitute the horizon against which we shape our selves, i.e., our moral identity. As elaborated in §2.3.6, C. Taylor believes that a conglomerate of tendencies associated with the process of modernization has resulted in a loss of access to these resources for modern individuals. This, he contends, has resulted in a moral identity crisis for late modern individuals. By exploring the gradual transformations of our modern self-understanding and the conceptualizations of the good or best that underlie it, C. Taylor strives to uncover fundamental identity resources that have disappeared from public moral discourse.

C. Taylor's work on the moral sources of our modern identity is highly erudite and rich, so that it is impossible to do full justice to all the developments he describes in the context of the current study. However, in light of the focus in this section on historical accounts of what constitutes the best in us with relevance to self-realization, it is important to highlight one specific theme of C. Taylor's analysis. This concerns his observations regarding the emergence, during the course of modernization, of the idea that human beings have an inner realm. C. Taylor perceives this development as quintessential to understanding the evolution of the moral sources of identity available to modern individuals. The inner realm is perceived as the seat of their selves or their "soul", the source of the aspirations and capacities that guide their self-realization (see §4.2.1). Crucial to this development is what C. Taylor (1989) calls "radical reflexivity" (p. 131). This term describes human beings as capable of taking a first-person perspective, reflecting on their own life and the highest values they strive for. This radical reflexive first-person perspective was first introduced by early Christian thinkers such as Augustine, and was then carried forward in different directions by thinkers such as Locke, Descartes, Montaigne, Rousseau and Nietzsche. Ideas about radical reflexivity have profoundly influenced our

modern self-understanding. As C. Taylor (1989) argues, since radical reflexivity became rooted in our collective self-image, "the road from the lower to the higher, the crucial shift in direction, passes through our attending to ourselves as *inner*" (p. 129). Consequently, regardless of how one interprets the best in human beings, self-realization can no longer be conceived without taking the inner realm of human beings into account.

From C. Taylor's and G. Gerhardt's views, a catalogue of historical and philosophical interpretations of what constitutes the best in human beings can be deduced. The selection of views discussed below certainly does not present an exhaustive overview. However, it illustrates that the fabric of self-realization discourse is rich and complex, and that its pattern is woven from different threads, that can be traced to their different appearances throughout philosophical history. This study will argue in favor of a distinction between three main threads that together form the purpose of self-realization as I interpret it: autonomy, authenticity and virtue (§4.3.2). Although the listing below of historical-philosophical interpretations of the best that is relevant to self-realization remains incomplete and brief, it does provide a starting point for a discussion of these threads.

1. *Mastery of passion through reason*: A catalogue of conceptualizations of the good in Western philosophy cannot escape starting with Plato. According to Plato (as cited in C. Taylor, 1989), human striving should be directed towards the mastery of our earthly passions and desires through reason. Reason is seen as our road of access to what Plato conceived as the eternal Good, of which our earthly goods are only incomplete adumbrations. Although Plato certainly did not locate the eternal Good in the individual realm, as C. Taylor (1989) shows, none of the later accounts of what constitutes the best in us can be properly understood without acknowledging the Platonic origins of thinking about the good.
2. *Eudaimonia*: More down-to-earth than Plato's account is Aristotle's (as cited in G. Gerhardt, 1989) ethics, which is perhaps the oldest explicit representation of a self-realization-ethics in Western philosophy. Aristotle presents *eudaimonia* (or happiness) as the ultimate goal of human striving. In this tradition, the best life is believed to be acquired by optimally fulfilling one's natural potentials as a human being. Aristotle's virtue ethics (*Ethica Nicomachea*) can be seen as the most well-known and influential approach advancing this idea.
3. *Self-forsaking and self-transcendence*: Early Christian thinkers like Augustine (as cited in C. Taylor, 1989) and Thomas Aquinas (as cited in C. Taylor, 1989) criticized the striving for flourishing in the context of earthly life. The best in human life could only be found in devotion to God. Virtues relevant in practical earthly contexts stressed by the Greek tradition (such as cour-

age, justice and wisdom) were replaced by virtues believed to contribute to the union of the human soul with God, namely, faith, hope and love (Van Tongeren, 2012). Paradoxically, the road to self-realization was thus sought in self-sacrifice and self-transcendence, postponing ultimate fulfillment to the afterlife.

4. *Rational mastery of the world*: Descartes' (as cited in C. Taylor, 1989) strict separation between the knowing subject or *cogito,* and the world of objects, led to an ideal of rational detachment whereby human subjects, by virtue of their capacity for reason, acquired the status of sovereign masters of the world. During the scientific revolution of the 16th and 17th century, the Cartesian rational, detached attitude, ascribed to the subject as a sovereign locus of control, became imbued with the status of the best human potential.
5. *Self-preservation*: Thinkers such as Locke (as cited in C. Taylor, 1989) and Hobbes (as cited in G. Gerhardt, 1989) saw enlightened self-interest as one of the strongest and most fundamental human motivations. This nourished their idea of the social order being based on a "contract" between free and equal individual agents, installed in order to guarantee their maximal benefit. Striving for self-preservation by advancing and maximizing one's self-interest was thus added to the catalogue of views deliberating the best in human beings.
6. *Self-knowledge*: Another appearance of the modern radical reflexivity can be found in the work of Montaigne (as cited in C. Taylor, 1989). He stressed the importance of self-investigation, which should yield us insight into our own deepest motivations, inclinations, thoughts and feelings. The corresponding conceptualization of the best in human beings can be defined as the ability to view ourselves clearly and modestly, with all our limitations, to gain in self-knowledge; a virtue already valued by Socrates and the Stoics.
7. *Self-determination*: Enlightenment thinkers, most notable of them being Kant (as cited in C. Taylor, 1989), claimed that the ultimate source of moral authority is the moral law situated within us. The best in ourselves can be identified here in terms of our capacities for reason and autonomy. By replacing heteronomy and following authorities with autonomous rational "thinking for oneself", moral self-direction and self-determination become possible.
8. *Expression of inner nature*: Rousseau (as cited in C. Taylor, 1989) and his Romantic heirs criticized the Enlightenment emphasis on rationality and autonomy, focusing on our emotions and creative capacities instead. By learning to follow the compass of our inner nature, and expressing our authentic emotions and inclinations, our true potentials for moral agency can be realized. Following one's inner voice could thus be perceived as the best to be strived for in self-realization.

9. *Self-elevation*: Post-Romantic thinkers such as Nietzsche (as cited in G. Gerhardt, 1989, and in C. Taylor, 1989) voiced their suspicion of human beings being self-evidently inclined to moral goodness. Instead, they perceived the inner realm as a dark and amoral domain. However, rather than concluding that self-realization as a moral striving was flawed, they saw greatness in transcending mediocrity by elevating oneself to a superior mode of being. Creative expression and authentic affirmation of one's life and self was introduced as a new and provocative conception of the best potential of human beings.
10. *Radical freedom and self-choice*: Existential philosophers like Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Sartre (as cited in G. Gerhardt, 1989) suggested that, being "thrown" into the world, human beings optimally realize themselves through radically exercising their freedom, by embracing an existence without any prior or intrinsic meaning. This radical freedom and self-choice were perceived as both inescapable fate and the highest purpose of human life.
11. *Care*: Though not discussed by G. Gerhardt (1989) and C. Taylor (1989), feminist ethics in the 20th century introduced a moral focus on relations of care and responsibility that deserves a mention here as another perception of the best in human beings. Although not presented in terms of self-realization, the ability to care for others is seen as a very important virtue playing a fundamental role in maintaining human life and enabling its goodness (Tronto, 1993; Held, 2006).
12. *Self-appropriation*: A final item in the catalogue, also not discussed by G. Gerhardt (1989) and C. Taylor (1989) but relevant for my purposes, is the view represented by contemporary self-care or art of living perspectives, such as represented by Foucault (1984/1992) and his followers. They emphasize the moral importance of appropriating oneself, for instance one's purposes and motivations, without ignoring disciplining social forces. This approach values positive freedom, but precludes naïve assumptions about individual autonomy, authenticity and freedom that earlier thinkers believed in.

4.3.2 Three threads: autonomy, authenticity and virtue

The brief historical sketch of a selection of philosophical views about what constitutes the best in us to be actualized through self-realization, suggests that contemporary self-realization discourse draws on a very rich and complex set of ideas about what constitutes the optimal life for human beings. The catalogue of different views about what constitutes the best in human beings can be grouped or ordered in several ways, for instance, by focusing on the underlying assumptions about the world, or by distinguishing between self-directed

or community-directed views, et cetera. For the purposes of this study, it is my contention that an ordering along the lines of thematic affiliation between the different conceptualizations is most clarifying. This results in the suggested distinction between three threads that weave the rich fabric of thought on self-realization, which are coupled to three ways of conceptualizing the moral agent. These threads are defined as autonomy, authenticity and virtue.

- *Autonomy*: The first thread focuses on the capacity of human beings to autonomously define, choose and appropriate goals, values and motivations that are concordant with the demands of reason. It celebrates freedom, mastery and choice, and perceives the purpose of self-realization in terms of a self-determined life. The corresponding image of the moral agent presents an autonomous, rational, independent individual, who has the freedom as well as the moral obligation to lead a self-determined life. In the catalogue of philosophical views about what constitutes the best in human beings (§4.3.1), the ideas of rational mastery, self-preservation, self-determination, radical freedom/self-choice and self-appropriation all feed into the autonomy thread.
- *Authenticity*: The second thread focuses on the capacity of human beings to bring themselves, understood as their authentic, self-appropriated conception of who they want to be, to full creative expression. It celebrates self-knowledge, creativity, expressivity, sincerity and moral sensitivity. The purpose of self-realization is perceived in terms of becoming who you are, i.e., realizing your deepest aspirations to become a certain person, a more "true" or worthier version of yourself. The corresponding image of the moral agent presents searching, creative individuals, striving to obtain self-knowledge, making contact with their inner voice and optimally expressing their authenticity, as conditional for a fulfilled life that is genuinely one's own. In the catalogue, the ideas of self-knowledge, expression of inner nature, self-elevation, radical freedom/self-choice and in some sense also self-appropriation feed into the authenticity thread.
- *Virtue*: The third thread focuses on the capacity of human beings to develop their naturally given potentials into excellent character dispositions that are conducive to optimal flourishing, both of oneself and of the community one is a part of. It celebrates the practice of good habits, sociable and virtuous (for instance, just, courageous, temperate) behaviors, and wisdom. The corresponding image of the moral agent presents a virtuous, social and interdependent individual, who aims to develop good habits and excellent qualitative character dispositions. The good life is conceived as a life with and for others, as members of a community. In the catalogue, the ideas of eudaimonia, self-forsaking/self-transcendence, self-knowledge and care feed into the virtue thread.

It is my contention that autonomy, authenticity and virtue are all valuable representations of the purpose underlying self-realization, and should not be plotted against each other. The moral pluralism of late modernity requires an interpretation of self-realization which acknowledges the rightful claims of each thread. All three of the constitutive threads in combination are required to arrive at my reframed interpretation of self-realization, which aims to function as a resource for narratives of becoming about later life (see §3.4). Each of these constitutive concepts of the self-realization discourse has given rise to an often highly specialist philosophical discourse of its own, whereby the link with self-realization is not always explicitly made. In chapters 6, 7 and 8, the three threads are discussed in more detail. However, my intention in these chapters is not to give full philosophical accounts of autonomy, authenticity and virtue, respectively. Rather, my focus is on the question which interpretation of these concepts matches the reframed interpretation of self-realization aimed at in this study. It is also the contention of this study that the fundamental ills which the late modern interpretation of self-realization suffers from (see §2.5.1) can be largely attributed to its incomplete and sometimes perverted understanding of these constitutive concepts. For instance, late modern notions of autonomy have been criticized for presenting the individual as an atomistic being, only instrumentally engaged in relations with others, and attributed with an amount of rational control over the world that is not realistic for most people most of the time (M. Walker, 2007; see also chapter 6). On the other hand, modern notions of authenticity have been criticized as narcissistic and self-conscious (Lasch, 1979; C. Taylor, 1991; see also chapter 7). Interestingly, the eudaimonistic tradition focusing on virtue seems to be underrepresented in the typical late modern discourse on self-realization (see chapter 8).

As discussed in §2.5.2, these ambivalences of late modern self-realization discourse thrust themselves upon us when trying to apply this moral ideal to the context of aging. However, in my view, drawing on a self-realization discourse need not necessarily result in a defense of such problematic interpretations of autonomy and authenticity or a disregarding of virtue. The historical evolution of the self-realization discourse provides sufficient resources to generate alternative conceptualizations of these notions, which are able to underscore the moral importance of self-realization for us, as shown in chapters 6, 7 and 8. In combination, the critical reconsideration of existing accounts of autonomy, authenticity and virtue in these chapters provide us with the building blocks for the reframed interpretation of self-realization.

4.4 Self-realization and aging

Before proceeding to a more in-depth exploration of the constitutive concepts weaving the discourse of self-realization, let me conclude the current chapter with some reflections on self-realization and aging. As discussed in §4.2.4, self-realization is an endeavor that continues throughout life, but also seems to gain an increased urgency with aging. Two issues merit particular attention however, because they may still give us pause regarding the applicability of the self-realization discourse to later life: 1) what are the consequences of the fact that the time horizon changes for older people, i.e., that their past is generally longer than their (perceived) remaining future lifetime? and 2) what are the consequences of the radicalized confrontation with existential vulnerability in later life?

4.4.1 Self-realization and the shrinking of the future

No one knows how long they will live of course, but it is evident that as we age, the proportion of years still to be lived shrinks in comparison to the years we have already lived. The commonsensical intuition that has also found its way into classical developmental life-stage models such as Erikson's (1997), is that old age is a time for looking back and evaluating one's past life, instead of looking forward to future goals one wants to realize. Since the self-realization discourse is intrinsically teleological – it presupposes a purpose (telos) in the future to be strived for - the shrinking of the future that characterizes later life raises questions regarding the application of the self-realization discourse to aging. After all, if future-oriented strivings become less relevant as one ages, what does this imply for self-realization, which is intrinsically a future-directed endeavor? A number of reflections are relevant here:

- First of all, it is important to critically assess whether the often heard assumption that younger and middle-aged people are predominantly *prospectively* oriented (i.e., oriented towards the future) whereas older people are more *retrospectively* oriented (i.e., oriented towards the past) is actually correct or, alternatively, rests on biased ideas about old age. Baars (2012b) argues that what is often overlooked is that all these groups – youth, adults, elderly - actually live their lives in the present. As Baars emphasizes, for older people "it can be quite annoying that it is apparently beyond many people's scope that older persons also live in the present, that *these* days are also *their* days, and that they might even be interested in the future" (p. 153). If time is perceived as a narrative and subjective category, rather than just a "chronometric" and (supposedly) objective one, it becomes clear that the experience of aging as living in time harbors a variety of individual varia-

tions, and certainly does not exclude an orientation towards the future. The fact that this future is probably shorter does not have to diminish its importance. As a befriended older woman once told me, it remains important to "have something to wake up to in the morning, even if one is 83". This observation implies that the shrinking of the future that characterizes the life experience of older people need not derogate the value of one's striving for self-realization.

- Second, if we take into account that the approaching end of one's life may give people a heightened sense of the importance of living in the present and of realizing one's goals, it also follows that the teleological orientation of self-realization need not necessarily be in conflict with the shrinking time horizon of later life. The same effect is sometimes observed in people who have heard that they have a serious terminal illness and limited time left. They often report that their personal growth or moral self-development is experienced with increasing urgency due to their situation. It is further important to realize that for older people (and for others who know they are approaching death), attaining "closure" of certain issues in their lives may also be an important part of their self-realization. Even if this striving for closure indeed implies a heightened preoccupation with memories and people from the past, it can still constitute a purpose that fits into the framework of moral self-development that is presupposed by the self-realization discourse. Thus, though older people's future is indeed shorter and their orientation towards the past may dominate, their preoccupation with self-realization is not inevitably lessened by this fact.
- Third, although the shrinking of the future doesn't necessarily diminish the importance of self-realization, it should still be considered that it may possibly have an impact on the type of goals that people aim for. For instance, long-term goals connected with one's own achievement may shift to the background in favor of goals related to transcending one's self-directedness to contribute to the new generation, as Erikson (1997) described in his notion of *generativity*. To illustrate, it may be the aspiration of young scientists to become a respected authority in their field by publishing in high-impact journals and creating a large international network in order to realize these ambitions. By contrast, older or retired academics may rather focus on helping younger mentees find their way in academia, or, freed from the publication pressures, on writing books and articles that are more personal or unconventional, on themes they left out for instrumental reasons (such as chances for publication) earlier during their career. This difference shows that our aspirations regarding who we want to be or become can alter during our life. Note that this suggests that the shrinking of the future expectedly influences older people's aspiration fulfillment in particular (see §4.2.1).

A difficult point in this regard pertains to the experienced necessity or pressure to let go of certain long-term goals, because one becomes aware that they will not be reached in the time one has left, or because others communicate that aspired goals no longer suit the socio-cultural norms of one's chronological age. It can be painful to feel forced to let go of deeply-valued aspirations. In such cases, replacing one aspiration (that is no longer conceived as a realistic possibility) with another, more manageable goal can initially feel like a disappointment or a defeat, as if one were settling for a consolation prize. If, after a period of adaptation, one does not succeed in genuinely appropriating the replacing goal as a worthy purpose of one's own, and one remains stuck in grief and resentment over what has been lost, self-realization will expectedly be stymied.

The assumption that there may be a connection between the type of goals people strive for and their perception of the remaining time horizon of their lives is confirmed in research based on the *socioemotional selectivity theory* formulated by Laura Carstensen and her colleagues (Carstensen, Isaacowitz & Charles, 1999; Carstensen, 1991, 1992, 1995). The outcomes of this research strongly suggest that people who perceive the time horizon of their lives as shrinking tend to shift their life-orientation towards goals related to emotions, social relationships and existential meaning. In the words of Carstensen, Isaacowitz & Charles (1999), "the knowledge that time is limited has direct effects on emotional experience. Appreciation of the fragility of life, recognition that the passage of time cannot be stopped, and heightened awareness of one's immediate surroundings directly alters the experience of emotions. We also expect that, relieved of concerns for the future, endings bring out the best qualities in people [...] As people approach the ultimate ending – death – lives are evaluated, and a search for existential meaning in life places emotion at center stage" (p. 169).

- Fourth and finally, it should be noted that the whole assumption that self-realization is complicated or loses importance as a result of the shrinking time horizon could at least partially be influenced by the limitations imposed by stereotypical and marginalizing cultural narratives on who people can strive to be or become. It has been argued before that access to cultural resources for identity, as well as the recognition that one is capable and worthy to strive for certain purposes, is quintessential for optimal exercise of moral agency (see §3.2.3). While growing older, I stated, people's access to possible identity resources can become more limited. I suggested that the influence of stereotypical social positioning and lack of valued social roles can play a crucial role in this regard. Again, the suggested tension between self-realization and a shrinking time horizon is then not something that arises inevitably, but is (at least in part) a socio-culturally constituted problem. As Markus and Nurius (1986) emphasize in their theory about the

> variety of "possible selves" that people may have, "the pool of possible selves [that an individual can create] derives from the categories made salient by the individual's particular sociocultural and historical context and from the models, images, and symbols provided by the media and by the individual's immediate social experiences. Possible selves thus have the potential to reveal the inventive and constructive nature of the self but they also reflect the extent to which the self is socially determined and constrained" (p. 954).

In sum, the assumption that the shrinking time horizon characteristic of later life should automatically reduce or problematize the importance of self-realization, turns out to be too simplistic. Although a shift in aspirations or purposes one strives for may certainly appear, self-realization can still be very relevant for older people. Moreover, my reflections show that other factors besides a shrinking time horizon, such as stereotyping cultural narratives and the corresponding lack of recognition of moral agency, may play a more urgent role when self-realization is stymied in old age.

4.4.2 Self-realization and radicalization of existential vulnerability

The second issue that merits attention regarding self-realization and aging relates to existential vulnerability. Existential vulnerability has been argued to be characteristic of human life in general, but is confronted more radically in later life (see §2.4.6). After all, the aging process tends to increase our vulnerability to all sorts of losses. Aging also strengthens our consciousness of the finitude of existence through the awareness that the longest part of our lives is behind us and death is inevitably approaching. This awareness in itself can be regarded as a form of confrontation with existential vulnerability.

I have described existential vulnerability in terms of anything that might threaten or impede the experience of meaningfulness that one derives from having a satisfactory relation with the physical, social, personal and transcendent dimensions of life (see §2.4.6). Existential vulnerability was distinguished from other, contingent and situational forms of vulnerability that pertain to the influence of external factors like structural and societal arrangements or cultural imaginaries. The effects of contingent situational vulnerabilities on the lives of older people deserve resolute efforts to accomplish social change and reduce social inequalities, in order to improve their life circumstances and increase their chances of experiencing a meaningful life. By contrast, I argued that existential vulnerability asks for a strategy of meaningful integration, since it is a category of vulnerability that is inescapable. It would be a misunderstanding of the basic conditions of human life to treat it as an unfortunate temporary condition that can be kept under control.

The cultural decline- and age-defying narratives that were discussed in chapter 3 only seemed to offer two options to relate to the contingencies and existential vulnerabilities of later life: either passive surrender or active defense and/or denial. But in reality, when confronted with existential vulnerability one is forced to find a way to integrate it into one's life narrative, in order to maintain experiencing life as something meaningful and worth living. Neither surrender nor denial will be of much help regaining meaning in such situations.

The fundamental question that has to be faced here is whether self-realization, as it has been conceptualized in this chapter, is necessarily endangered or impeded by the confrontation with instances of existential vulnerability. Two issues deserve particular attention in this regard:

- First, it is important to consider which understandings of self-realization and vulnerability are implied in the assumption that existential vulnerability may create a problem for self-realization. The latter view implies that existential vulnerability compromises circumstances or capacities that are presumed to be necessary for self-realization. It is my contention that the implicit view we encounter here is based on precisely the late modern, liberal conceptualization of self-realization that the current study wants to criticize. In this view, we may recall, moral agents are presented as atomistic, autonomous individuals who independently make their own way in the world and strive to lead a fully self-determined life. Obviously, being confronted with existential vulnerability will threaten this independence and self-determination, which brings Hoffmaster (2006) to the conclusion that vulnerability is "antithetical to the ethos of individualism" (p. 42). However, this assumes several things, for instance that being dependent on others inevitably means being less autonomous, less self-determined, and therefore in a less favorable condition to realize oneself. What this view disregards however, is the fact that existential vulnerability is a fundamental feature of the human condition. It may not be equally pressing in everybody's life at any given moment, but we are all liable to be confronted with it. In this understanding, existential vulnerability by no means precludes forming aspirations to become a certain kind of person. Otherwise no one could ever aspire to self-realization, which seems an unreasonably crude assumption. This study defends a view in which social (inter)dependence is assumed as the default condition of human lives. It is argued later that this condition of interdependence need not be at odds with the underlying assumptions of my suggested reframed interpretation of self-realization. When following this line of thinking, growing older and being confronted with radicalized existential vulnerability, for instance, by experiencing physical deterioration due to senescing processes or social losses because one's spouse or friends die, are not automatically detrimental for self-realization.

- Second, it is important to consider the possibility that not only do existential vulnerability and self-realization not exclude each other, but that the confrontation with existential vulnerability may even serve as a catalyst for self-realization. Although on the one hand some capacities traditionally associated with self-realization, such as self-determination or rational deliberation, may certainly become more fragile in later life; on the other hand, the confrontation with vulnerability may also prompt the development of other, new capacities, such as moral sensitivity or empathy. For example, after the loss of her husband, an older acquaintance found a new source of personal fulfillment in leading a church support group for recently bereaved people, which still greatly contributes to her self-realization.
  As discussed in §4.3, the best in us at stake in self-realization has been conceptualized in terms of a rich variety of ways, including our ability for self-knowledge, moral sensitivity, receptivity, creativity or care. Aligned with this, MacIntyre (1999) has argued that in order to flourish, human beings need both virtues that enable self-sufficiency and rational deliberation and what he calls "virtues of acknowledged dependence" (p. 126-127). The confrontation with vulnerability may teach us to (further) develop precisely those qualities associated with the latter category of virtues. Then, the existential vulnerability confronted in (later) life not only complicates self-realization in certain ways, but also offers opportunities to acquire new virtues that are conducive to our self-realization in later life. It follows that existential vulnerability is only an automatic impediment to self-realization when we follow the problematically limited interpretation of self-realization that only focuses on self-sufficiency and rational self-determination (see chapter 2).
  The possibility that being confronted with existential vulnerability gives rise to the development of new virtues and capacities does presuppose however, that we have the courage and the flexibility to reconsider our identity-constituting aspirations in situations where our previous goals are no longer possible. Expectedly, if we follow too strictly the strategies typical of age-defying narratives (§3.3.3) and make "staying young" our main purpose in later life, we miss out on these opportunities. We need to steer between the Scylla of active denial and resistance of existential vulnerability and the Charybdis of passive surrender to existential vulnerability, if we want to profit from the opportunities for self-realization that later life confrontations with vulnerability may have to offer.

To conclude, let me briefly recall the reason for this study to engage with the philosophical self-realization discourse. As argued in §3.4, I turned to the self-realization discourse to find a viable resource for the suggested narratives of becoming. In order to serve as such a resource, self-realization discourse

should be able to answer to both conditions that I have defined for such narratives: the acknowledgment of the potential for growth and flourishing in later life, and the support of a meaningful integration of existential vulnerability. I believe the analysis of self-realization in this chapter has made it clear that this philosophical discourse indeed harbors a strong and lively conviction that human beings principally possess the potential for growth and development. Moreover, it has been argued that the moral self-development underlying this study's interpretation of self-realization should engage human persons throughout their entire lives. Therefore, in my understanding of self-realization, the notion of growth and flourishing, of realizing the best that one is capable of, is by no means restricted to young people who have all of their lives ahead of them. This is an important advantage in the search for cultural counter narratives of becoming about later life that are able to acknowledge that later life may also harbor the potential for growth and flourishing.

Regarding the integration of existential vulnerability, I hope to have made it plausible that in this study's suggested interpretation, contrary to the late modern discourse, self-realization need not be a narcissistic endeavor, aimed at obtaining mastery over the contingencies of life and thus at the rejection or conquering of existential vulnerability. Instead, I suggested in the last section (§4.4.2) that self-realization can also include the development of qualities that teach people how to find a satisfactory attitude towards these contingencies. In this sense, the second condition that was identified as necessary for viable cultural counter stories about later life - the enabling of a meaningful integration of existential vulnerability – also certainly finds resonance in my suggested reframed view of self-realization.

Now that we have gained an initial understanding of the philosophical discourse on self-realization, which has already broadened our view compared to the late modern interpretation of the concept, I can proceed to the reframing of self-realization that I argued was necessary to apply this moral ideal to the context of aging. This reframing will require developing alternative understandings of the constitutive concepts on which self-realization discourse relies. As might be expected from my argument in §4.3.2, it is particularly important to reframe the three threads that weave the fabric of self-realization discourse. Before I can proceed to an evaluation and reframing of existing views on autonomy, authenticity and virtue however, I first need to consider in more detail the themes of self-identity and moral agency, both of which are intrinsic to self-realization as it has been presented in this chapter. Understanding which conceptualizations of identity and moral agency are presupposed by the reframed conceptualization of self-realization that this study strives to develop, is conditional to enable further elaboration of the constitutive threads of self-realization.